What We Talk About When We Talk About Inequality:
An introduction to the *Journal of Management Studies* Special Issue

Roy Suddaby*
University of Victoria
&
Newcastle University

Garry D. Bruton
Texas Christian University

James P. Walsh
University of Michigan

* corresponding author: Roy Suddaby Winspear Chair of Management
Peter B. Gustavson School of Business
University of Victoria
Victoria, British Columbia, Canada V8P 4V4
rsuddaby@uvic.ca
+1-250-721-6401

The empirical fact of inequality is beset by ongoing debates and unresolved questions. What is inequality? How do we measure it? Most critically, is inequality getting worse? Some say yes. An Oxfam report presented at the World Economic Forum last year reinforces the observation that we used to motivate this special issue – the wealth of the world's 62 richest individuals equals that of half the world's poorest individuals – some three and a half billion people (Oxfam, 2016). When we announced this special issue, quoting Oxfam's 2014 data, we remarked that 85 individuals controlled such wealth. The number was 388 in 2010. As Figure 1A demonstrates, the concentration of global wealth is increasing.

Such concentration of wealth has been occurring for a long time. Figure 1B shows that the wealthiest 1% of Americans have consistently appropriated between ten and twenty-four percent of the total earned income in the United States over the last eight years (Pickety & Saez, 2003). The trend is not confined to the US. Figure 1C illustrates the concentration of wealth among one-percenters around the world over the past thirty years (Alvaredo, Chancel, Piketty, Saez & Zucman, 2017). Clearly, when measured as the concentration of wealth, inequality seems to be increasing.

Insert Figures 1A, 1B and 1C about here

Others say 'no', inequality is not getting worse, particularly if we shift the conversation from 'inequality' to 'poverty'. Economist Paul Collier observes, "since 1980 world poverty has been falling for the first time in history" (Collier, 2007: 3).

Collier measures global poverty in absolute terms. Deirdre McCloskey argues that, when measured as a proportion of the global population, world poverty has been falling for two hundred years. McCloskey observes that, while we once thought of the inequality challenge as the richest one billion people versus five billion poor, the relative proportion today is actually six billion rich or “richifying people facing a bottom billion of persistently poor” (McCloskey, 2016: 9). As Nicholas Kristof (2017: SR11), the *New York Times* columnist, told his readers, “Cheer up: Despite the gloom, the world truly is becoming a better place. Indeed, 2017 is likely to be the best year in the history of humanity.”

It is interesting to observe how, over the years, talk about poverty has given way to talk of inequality. In the US this shift in conversation occurred sometime between 1964 and 2013. President Lyndon B. Johnson famously announced his “War on Poverty” to Congress on January 8, 1964. Almost sixty years later, on December 4th, 2013, President Barack Obama (2013) declared, “The combined trends of increased inequality and decreasing mobility pose a fundamental threat to the American Dream, our way of life, and what we stand for around the globe.”

Why did the conversation shift from poverty to inequality? Was it because the US won the war on poverty? Not likely. The proportion of US citizens living in poverty was 19 percent when Johnson declared war in 1964. Today, the number is 14.3 percent (UC Davis, 2017). An improvement? Yes. But it is hardly a victory. After some initial progress in the 1960s, the official poverty rate has fluctuated between eleven and fifteen percent ever since (see Figure 2).

Insert Figure 2 about here

We glean two key observations from this debate. First, while we can quibble about the empirical status of poverty and inequality – how to measure it, and how much it is changing – the fact is that both poverty and inequality are a stubbornly persistent part of the human condition. Like religion, capitalism and marriage, poverty and inequality are well-established social institutions. Second, and perhaps more important for the purposes of this essay, *how* we talk about the phenomenon – the frames that we chose (i.e. poverty or inequality), the justifications that we find persuasive, our choice of vocabulary - is as important and as revealing as is the debate about whether poverty or inequality are growing or receding.

It is striking that despite the fact that there is considerable attention devoted to issues of poverty and inequality outside the world of business, this is often overlooked. Instead there is an increased assumption that the language of business is most appropriate to describe the problem of poverty and inequality, and the intensification of business practice will ultimately deliver the solution. This is somewhat counterintuitive because strategic management is premised on the logic of inequality – i.e. that resources are unevenly distributed, are imperfectly mobile and the goal of business is to exacerbate their immobility in order to disrupt equilibrium and earn excess rents (Peteraf, 1993). Given this premise it is, perhaps, unsurprising that the proposed solution to poverty, by some, is to increase inequality.

It was not always thus. Consider how we talked about inequality during the Industrial Revolution. In *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Friedrich

Engels (1892: xv) places the source of inequality squarely in the domain of politics and law:

> "But as to the great mass of working people, the state of misery and insecurity in which they live now is as low as ever, if not lower. The East End of London is an ever-spreading pool of stagnant misery and desolation, of starvation when out of work, and degradation, physical and moral, when in work. And so in all other large towns – abstraction made of the privileged minority of the workers; and so in the smaller towns and in the agricultural districts. The law which reduces the value of labour-power to the value of the necessary means of subsistence, and the other law which reduces its average price, as a rule, to the minimum of those means of subsistence, these laws act upon them with the irresistible force of an automatic engine, which crushes them between its wheels."

Note the vividly emotive language used to describe the effect of inequality. The words "misery", "desolation" and "starvation" stand in powerful contrast to the antiseptic economic language of inequality that we use today – "rich", "poor", "income", "wages", "proportion" and "social cohesion". This is how Oxfam (2016) discussed these matters at the 2017 gathering of the World Economic Forum:

> "Rising inequality is a problem for all of us. The OECD notes that increasing income inequality poses a risk for social cohesion and threatens to slow down the current economic recovery. The World Bank cites 'promoting shared prosperity' as one of its two primary goals, complementing that of reducing poverty. Even the IMF has highlighted the fact that inequality can have negative consequences not just for the poorest people but for the overall health of economies."

When viewed through the cold lens of a Pareto-efficient frontier, inequality becomes more a problem for the global economy than for those individuals that are "crushed between its wheels".

How did we get here? How did debates about poverty move from talk of the lived experience of poverty to talk of the global status order? How did the debate shift from resolving the "ever-spreading pool of stagnant misery" to "promoting shared prosperity"? When did inequality become more compelling than poverty?

Rhetoricians remind us that words matter. The language that we employ to describe the world reveals hidden assumptions about the way we perceive and construct social reality. Language records our values and unmasks our justification for action. Most critically, our choice of language reveals the dominant ideology – the cultural belief system, assumptions of value, and vocabularies of motive (Mills, 1940) – of a given society. How we talk about a subject shows us how we think about it.

Each paper in this special issue offers unique insight into what we mean when we talk about inequality. They share the understanding that inequality is a stubborn social institution and, collectively, describe an implicit process model by which talk first creates inequality, and then normalizes and maintains it. Our contributors suggest that talk of inequality can also provide the means to disrupt it. The thread that ties these papers together mirrors the process by which institutions are understood to be created, maintained and eroded (Lawrence & Suddaby, 2006). We elaborate that thread in the balance of this essay, paying particular attention to the role of talk in creating, maintaining and eroding inequality.

How talk creates inequality

We likely underestimate the importance of books in shaping institutions. Harriet Beecher Stowe's publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852 was a pivotal moment in destabilizing the institution of slavery. An instant best seller, this book galvanized the moral outrage that would motivate and sustain the Civil War (Lowance, Westbrook & De Prospo, 1994). In his contribution to this volume, Newbert (2018) observes that Adam Smith's publication of *The Wealth of Nations* plays a similar pivotal role in the creation of modern rationalized notions of inequality. Newbert argues that Smith's failure to properly situate his description of "economic man" in *The Wealth of Nations* within the broader normative context he outlined in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, contributed to the contemporary assumption that economics and morality are ontologically distinct categories. It is this omission in "talk", Newbert asserts, that institutionalized the separation of economy and morality (or self and societal interest) that is best captured in the now famous statement that socially responsible business is a "fundamentally subversive doctrine" (Friedman, 1962: 133).

Newbert's thesis, that Adam Smith's intellectual legacy is based largely on a single book rather than his overall philosophy, is borne out by the disparity in citation impact of his two works. As of the writing of this essay, Google scholar reports that *The Wealth of Nations* has been cited 44,699 times, three times as much as *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (14,733 times). Clearly, we prefer to talk more about wealth than we do morality. An analysis of the relative market value of the two books further reinforces Newbert's argument. The bid price asked for a top quality first edition of *The Wealth of Nations*, according to Abebooks, is $235,000 USD, as compared to only $89,575.50 for a first edition of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*. Clearly, the market has spoken not only on the separation of wealth and morals, but also on their relative economic value.

The observation that our view of poverty and inequality is delimited by a selective consumption of talk in books is supported by Wadhwani's (2018) analysis of the emergence of savings and loan banks (the precursor to modern consumer banking) as an institutional response to poverty. In a fascinating historical analysis, Wadhwani points to the importance of talk in books that transformed poverty from an imperfect human state to a recognized category of social immorality. At the beginning of the Industrial

Revolution, Wadhwani observes, poverty was accepted as “a natural, even divine condition” that was not causally connected to the massive social upheaval generated by industrialization. It was the publication of Thomas Malthus’ *Essay on Population* that convinced policymakers that pauperism was “caused”, not by industrial expansion, but, somewhat paradoxically, by charity. Free resources, Malthus argued, simply encouraged the indigent classes to propagate. The savings and loan was created to solve the problem of pauperism by substituting the individual moral virtue of thrift for the social vice of charity.

The modern version of Malthus’ ability to shape the collective cognition of inequality as a failing of the individual is Ayn Rand’s influential tome *Atlas Shrugged*. Like Malthus, Rand firmly places the blame for economic inequality on the individual. In contrast to Malthus, however, the solution is not simply the elimination of charity, but rather is the exacerbation of inequality. Alan Greenspan, former head of the US Federal Reserve, acknowledges the profound influence Rand had on his implementation of ‘trickle down” economic policy. “What she did,” Greenspan told a *New York Times* Reporter in 1974, “was to make me think why capitalism is not only efficient and practical but also moral” (Cassidy, 2000: 167). The book has proven to be extremely influential on other influential policy makers, from Ronald Reagan to Margaret Thatcher. President Donald Trump, for example, claims Ayn Rand as his favourite novelist and *The Fountainhead* his favorite novel (Stewart, 2017).

Selective reading is itself, a type of inequality. The shift in conversation away from poverty and toward inequality reflects a mode of thinking that philosopher Allan Bloom called “The Closing of the American Mind”. Bloom (1987) argued that the open relativism and inherent reductionism of modern education has devalued the wisdom of the great books of western thought. A selective and uncritical reading of Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, for example, focuses attention on his interest in rationality and the pursuit of religious salvation through secular self-interest. However, it ignores Weber's more nuanced argument about the humanistic value of myth and magic in social change (Suddaby, Ganzin & Minkus, 2017). Bloom argued that it is such rational dismissiveness of the nuanced complexity of humanism that encourages the belief that civil society can be built on self-interest alone, and that commercial interests can be valued more highly than love, honour or character.

How talk maintains inequality

Three of our contributors help us to understand how, once established, the ideology of institutionalized inequality is sustained through talk. Analyzing data from the German General Social Survey, Haack and Siewicke (2018) demonstrate how, after the reintegration of East and West Germany, East Germans very quickly "normalized" the high degree of income inequality in their new capitalist society. Two critical variables determined the pace of legitimation of inequality – the time an individual spent under the old regime of assumed equality and the pace at which new members are born into the new regime of capitalist inequality. The two measures, Haack and Sieweke (2018) conclude, serve as proxies for the collective legitimation of inequality. Through socialization (i.e. talk of what is acceptable, normal and valued in a society), we gradually begin to see inequality as a natural and maybe even a desirable state of the human condition.

Neville, Forrester, O'Toole and Riding (2018) extend this argument by showing how, once established, inequality is maintained by a different form of talk – the self-talk of discouragement. Based on an analysis of US data derived from the U.S. Federal Reserve Board's *Survey of Small Business Finances*, these researchers show that minority entrepreneurs consistently choose not to pursue available sources of financing because they thought their application would be turned down. Despite the considerable empirical evidence that demonstrates "opportunity recognition" as the defining feature of successful entrepreneurship (Alvarez & Barney, 2007), this study shows that African-American and Hispanic entrepreneurs are significantly more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to self-select themselves out of financing opportunities.

Such internalization of inequality is a clear demonstration of a successful project of institutionalization. A social practice is institutionalized when it becomes so legitimate, so taken-for-granted, and so internalized that actors lack awareness of alternatives (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In this vein, we note Hoxby and Turner (2015) recently documented the tragic lack of understanding of a college education that marks high-achieving, low-income students in America. This kind of profound lack of awareness of opportunity, according to Margaret Archer (2007), occurs as a result of an internal conversation – a form of self-talk – through which individual reflexivity (i.e. an awareness of the sources of one's lack of social mobility) is constructed. The capacity to overcome institutional barriers to change occurs as a result of the intersection of reflexivity and social skill (Suddaby, Viale & Gendron, 2016). Discouragement, however, is a construct that describes the erosion of social skill.

Perhaps the most shocking element of Neville et al.'s (2018) study is the observation that different degrees of internalized discouragement can be observed across different types of minority groups. African Americans demonstrate the highest levels of discouraging self-talk, followed closely by Hispanics. Asian American entrepreneurs, by contrast, are relatively indistinguishable from Hispanics in terms of their levels of discouragement. In explaining this difference, Neville et al. (2018) hypothesize that the unique history of African Americans may explain the observed fact that they exhibit three or four times the level of discouragement to pursue financial opportunities than their Hispanic or Asian counterparts. The self-conversation of discouragement amongst African Americans has become so deeply internalized that it appears to be part of the collective memory of an entire mnemonic community (Zerubavel, 2009). A clear conclusion from Neville et al.'s (2018) research is that, like any institution, inequality has an established status order. Apparently, even inequality is distributed unequally.

Hamann and Bertel's (2018) analysis of mining companies' efforts to maintain access to cheap labour in South Africa over one hundred and fifty years offers a nuanced historical description of how elites work to transfer structures of institutionalized inequality over time, and across an ever changing panorama of corporate actors. Somewhat counter intuitively, they find that when labour is scarce, employers increased their coercive efforts to conscript and control labour. And, when labour is abundant, Hamann and Bertels (2018) find that employers relax the coercive pressure and offer workers the illusion of choice in employment, while transferring the coercive structures of employment to other actors, including the workers themselves. These findings not only offer a compelling historical description of the evolution of Weber's "iron cage", it defies established economic theories of how labour markets are thought to work. They provide a very interesting glimpse into how, once internalized, institutionalized inequality encourages the disadvantaged to act against their own economic (and political) interests.

While the primary focus of the Hamann and Bertel's (2018) argument is on structures and practices of institutionalized inequality, we see glimpses here of just how the transfer of structures of inequality is so dependent upon talk. The illusion of choice that employers offer workers when labour is abundant is clearly a process of rhetorical persuasion. Based on the Neville et al. (2018) study of a systemic history of internalized discouragement, we can also see how a form of internal talk is a prerequisite for workers in times of surplus labour to adopt practices of self-exploitation.

How talk can change inequality

Lest our special issue be seen as pessimistic, overly focusing on how inequality is created and sustained, we note that at least one of our contributions offers a degree of optimism. Examining how the incursion of immigrant African entrepreneurs into South Africa helped to erode existing structures of inequality, Griffen-El and Oblasi (2018) demonstrate how talk can disrupt inequality. The authors identify three key mechanisms by which institutionalized inequality can be eroded; through the creation of new cognitions or categories of actors, through the creation of new practices of business, and through idiosyncratic interpretations of what were previously taken-for-granted ways of conducting business.

The Griffen-El and Oblasi study highlights how, over generations, inequality can be so embedded in every-day community life that it becomes invisible to all, except outsiders. While yes, on occasion, the iron cage of institutionalized inequality may be broken by the reflexive introspection of an individual (Archer, 2007), it is more likely to be disrupted by outsiders who, like visitors to your home, have not yet become inured to the cobwebs of habituated neglect. Outsiders can see our world in ways that we cannot.

Two key lessons emerge from this revealing study. The first is the somewhat frightening capacity of humans to become so habituated to inequality as to make it disappear from our collective awareness. The second is the critical importance of diversity (i.e., the movement of ideas across time, and individuals across cultures) in disrupting our eptistemic assumptions of inequality as a naturalized order. It is ironic that inequality can be both created and solved by processes of "othering" (creating arbitrary and invidious distinctions among and between people). When we invite alien "others" into our communities, we introduce the capacity to make the familiar strange and see the waste of opportunity that results from institutionalized inequality.

Why how we talk matters

It is no accident that over the past one hundred and fifty years, our talk of poverty and starvation has morphed to talk of degrees of richness and proportions of poor. Like much of contemporary life, our talk of inequality has adapted to reflect the rational myths of the contemporary institutional environment. Dominated as we are by the language and impulse of economics and management, we are preoccupied with inequality's measurement, and often ignore the lived experience of systemic poverty too often passed from one generation to the next.

Unfortunately, some members of society benefit from talking about inequality rather than poverty. Poverty is abhorrent. Not even the fictional character Gordon Gecko, whose mantra "greed is good" introduced in the 1987 movie *Wall Street* [and which coincides precisely with the resurgent growth of inequality in the US and other Anglophone countries (see Figure 3)] could get away with saying poverty is good. But inequality is at least one step removed from the harsh and incorrigible reality of starvation. Shifting the talk to inequality allows a well-to-do segment of society to separate poverty from inequality and so pronounce, “greed is good”. Through such rationalization, politicians and economists can, without a hint of embarrassment, say, “I hate poverty, but love inequality”. Inequality, they argue, has nothing to do with how one divides a pie; rather, they argue, it is about making a pie larger.

Insert Figure 3 about here

Substituting inequality for poverty in talk is a rhetorical strategy known as synecdoche – separating the part from the whole. Synecdoche is successful because it encourages reductionist thinking and, when used strategically, it can confuse an audience by mixing up the whole for the part, the “cause for the effect, effect for the cause, genus for the species, species for the genus" (Burke, 1945: 507). Synecdoche is just another form of “othering”. It uses language to focus attention on elements of a person, object or thing with the intent of making each appear to be abnormal or unnatural. It is a language game used by predators to divide and conquer, or to separate the weak from the herd.

Recounting his experiences as a Jewish refugee in France during the Second World War, Apfelbaum (1999) described how the Nazi’s used similar language of reductionism to focus public attention on characteristics of minority groups to create measures of inequality that were previously overlooked. The dominant group, she observes, developed standards based on characteristics and customs that they possess and encouraged others to emulate them, regardless of whether such emulation was appropriate, feasible or healthy for the general population. They also created and disseminated myths about cultural attributes of the "other" as avaricious, lazy, promiscuous, and a host of other shortcomings that further served to separate minorities, while simultaneously promoting myths that exaggerated the homogeneity of the dominant group. In this same way, Hintjens (1999: 267) tells us that prior to the 1994 Rwandan genocide, the "other," in this case, the Tutsis, "were reputed to behave in ways that placed them outside the norm of humanity; they were depicted as depraved beasts, capable of atrocities of all kinds including cannibalism, rape and other forms of deviance."

In fact, the adoption of the reductionist language of difference is a game of endless possibilities and reflects the very logic of inequality, suggesting that some are better or worse than others by identifying a single point of comparison – love, happiness, weight, skin color and so on. At this particular moment in history, we seem to be fixated on wealth as the focal variable for determining inequality. This is the Cartesian space within which we have chosen to play the game of inequality. The absence of wealth is a signifier for a host of related sins – a presumed lack of motivation, ambition or ability.

A recurring message in this special issue is that *reductionist talk and thinking is itself an important cause of inequality*. A selective and partial reading of Adam Smith's work might lead you to the erroneous conclusion that Smith admired the wealthy; a holistic reading of his work would clearly demonstrate that he did not. As Newbert (2018) suggests, a partial reading of Smith may have contributed to inequality but a holistic reading of his work will likely help us find the cure. Similarly, as Griffin-El and

Olabisi (2018) show us, a holistic approach to immigration will likely encourage diversity in ethnicity, generatively stimulate entrepreneurship, and help to heal long-standing divisions in society.

Our core argument is that we need to be more thoughtful and careful about what we are talking about when we talk about inequality. While construct clarity is generally preferable (Suddaby, 2014), there are dangers in narrowing our analytic focus too much. By embracing the contemporary language of inequality, we may be falling into a trap. Part of this trap is forgetting a history of discourse that began generations ago with a concern for poverty. Like welfare, poverty is a term that has been subject to systemic efforts to erode its legitimacy by interested actors. Just as we remember Engel's words, we should remember that Martin Luther King (1966) spoke of "the violence of poverty" as he fought for social justice in 1966. We should not flinch at the sound of such words. We need to push poverty back into the conversation about inequality. A more holistic understanding of inequality and poverty should help us find novel solutions to what has been an all too durable and pernicious social problem. Some skilled researchers are already doing so and, in the process, revealing a multiplex of causality between inequality, poverty and opportunity (see, for example, Chetty, Hadren, Kline & Saez, 2014 and Gould, Davis & Kimball, 2015).

We need to do more than just add words to our analytic vocabulary. We need to expand our methodological repertoire in the study of inequality. In short, we need to capture the "dirty reality" of poverty and inequality. Indeed, we would do well to inject much more of an appreciation for the humanities as we take what we can from economic reasoning (Morson and Schapiro, 2017). The inspiration for the title of this essay comes from American author Raymond Carver’s gritty short story, “What we talk about when we talk about love.” In it, he describes a gin-soaked conversation that revealed the many meanings of love. Carver’s taut writing style and his obsession with the everyday experiences of ordinary people, described by some as “dirty realism”, complements, if not strips, away much of the romantic idealism that clutters our talk of love. We need more dirty realism in how we see and study inequality. Just as Carver (1981) argued, “it ought to make us feel ashamed when we talk like we know what we’re talking about when we talk about love,” we should be ashamed by our ignorance of inequality. Thankfully, the collection of papers in this issue begins to shift the conversation away from debates about the empirical fact of inequality or how to best measure it, and toward more helpful talk of causes and solutions.

Figure 1A
Oxfam Report on Inequality presented at the Davos World Economic Forum

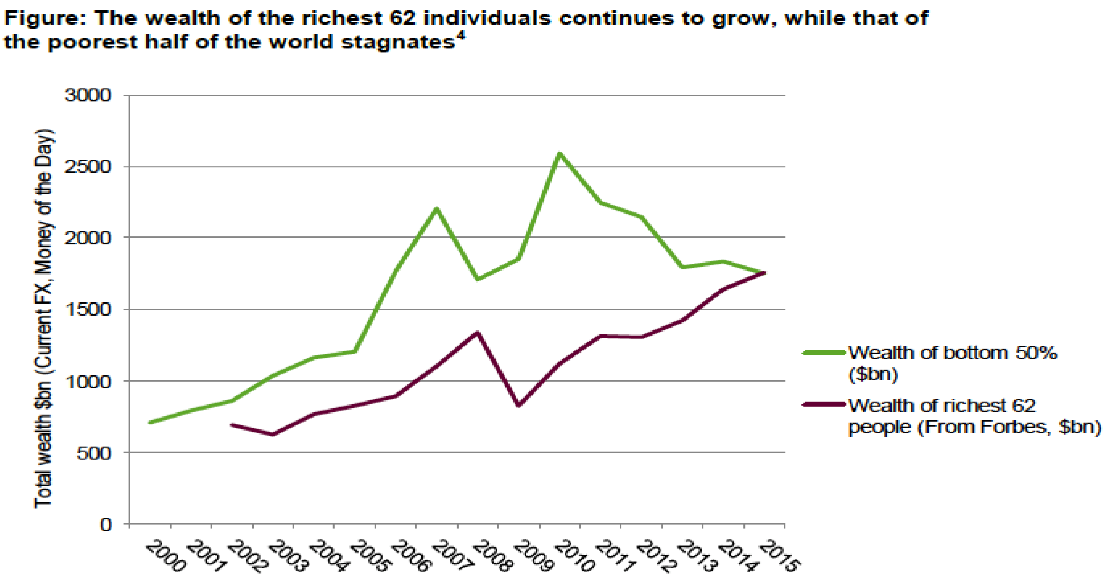


Figure 1B

Share of Total Pre-Tax Income, 1913-2008 (Pickety & Saez, 2003, Updated to 2008)

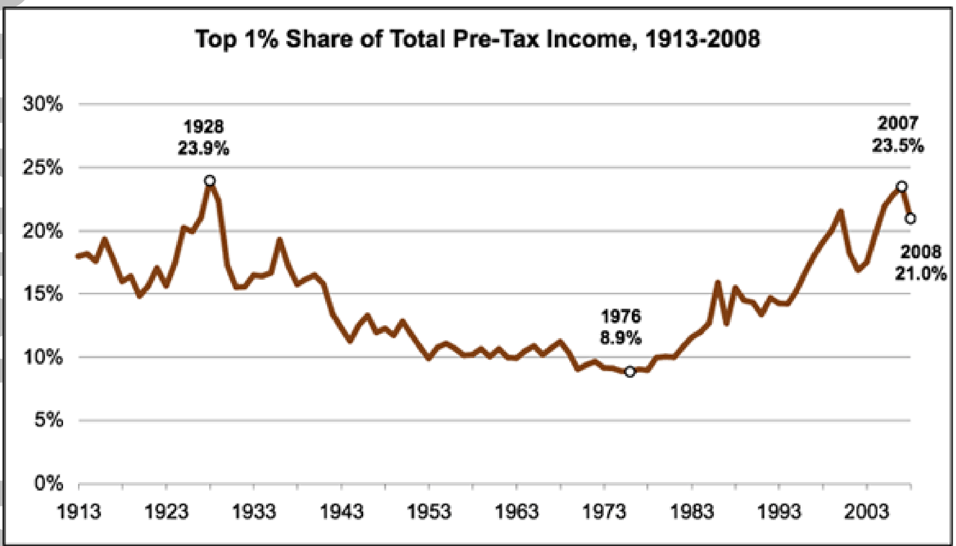
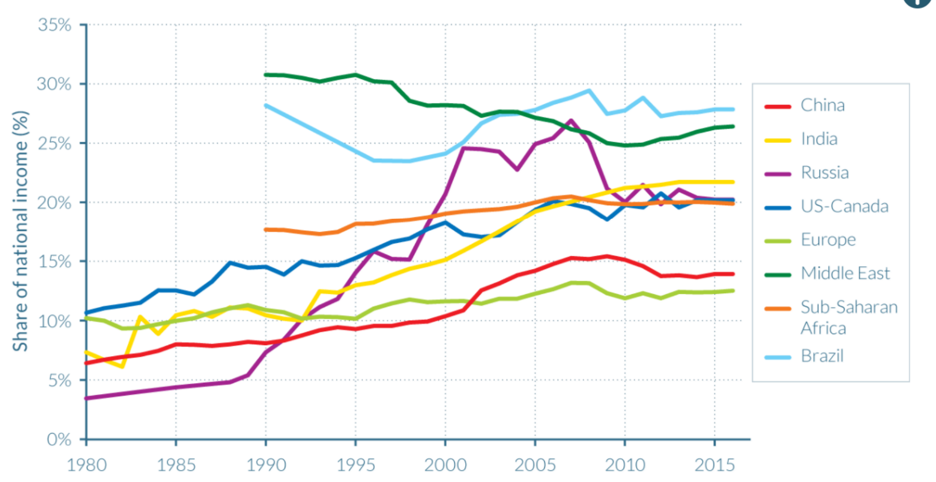


Figure 1C

Top 1% income shares across the world, 1980–2016 (Alvaredo et al., 2017)

Figure 2.1.1d

Top 1% income shares across the world, 1980–2016



Source: WID.world (2017). See wir2018.wid.world/methodology.html for data series and notes.
In 2016, 14% of national income was received by the Top 1% in China.

Figure 2
Historical Poverty Rates in the US

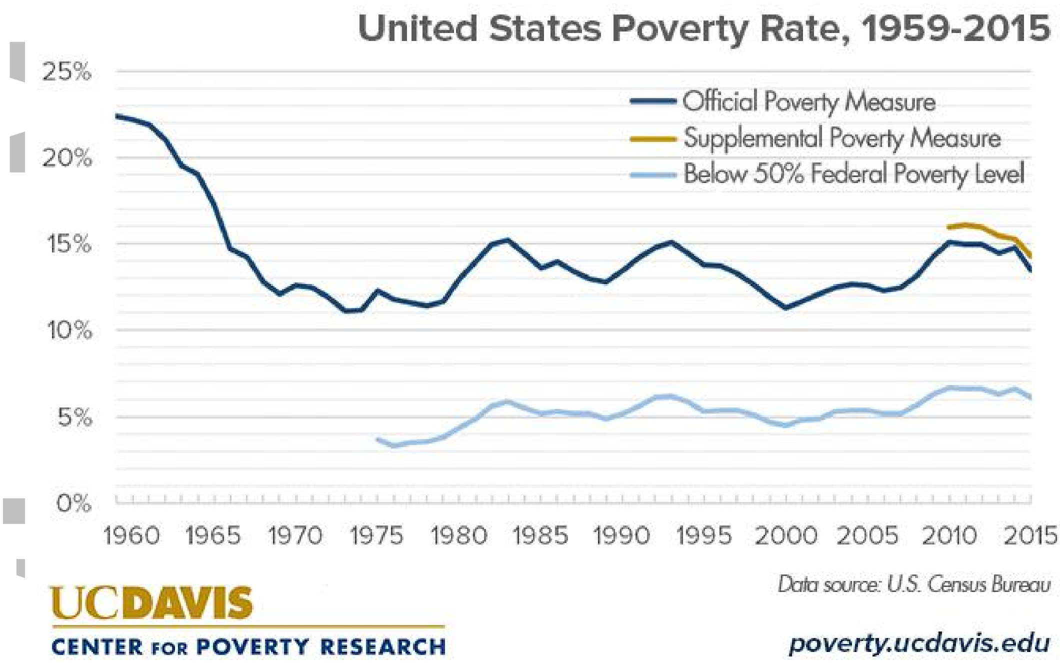
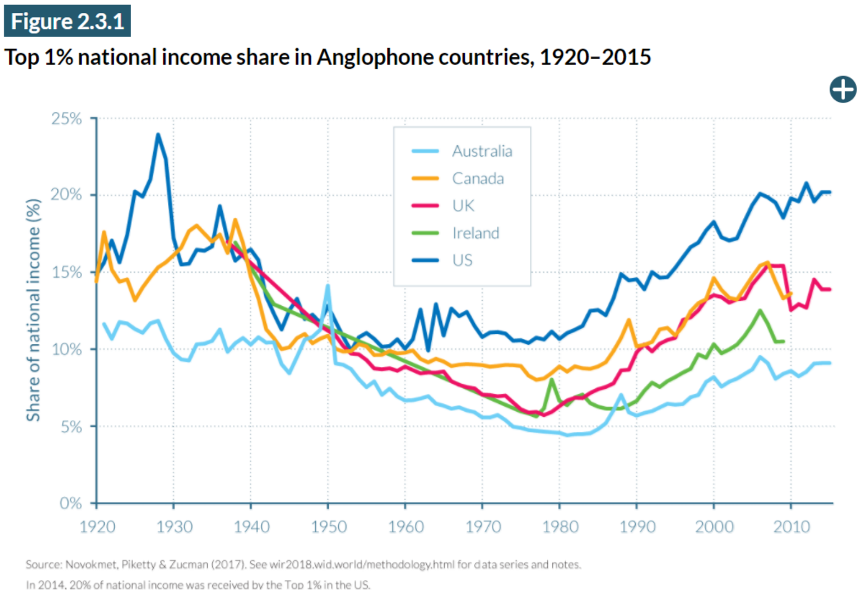


Figure 3

Top 1% national income shares in Anglophone countries, 1920-2015 (Alvaredo et al, 2017)



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